

2008 PARKS BOND CITIZENS ADVISORY COMMITTEE  
PROPERTY RECOMMENDATIONS  
TO  
THE COBB COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS  
October 26, 2009

**Committee Formation and Charge**

On November 4, 2008, the citizens of Cobb County voted "Yes" by a 65% majority to authorize the Board of Commissioners to issue another \$40,000,000 in general obligation bonds for the purchase of park land. This represents the community's continuing desire and commitment to protect the quality of life of our county for years to come by preserving land for public parks. As in the 2006 program, the land will be dedicated to this use in perpetuity.

With the success of the 2006 land purchase program, the decision was made to follow the same process for citizen involvement by appointment of a Parks Bond Citizens Advisory Committee. The appointment of three people to the committee by each commissioner was accomplished by the end of January. Eight of the members were on the previous committee and seven were new to the process.

The first meeting of the Citizens Advisory Committee took place on February 23, 2009. At the meeting, the committee was briefed on the proposed process and received information from the county Legal Department on the Ethics Law and the Open Records Act. Also discussed was the Open Meetings Act which requires all meetings to be public with meeting dates and times to be posted in advance. The act further allows discussion of land purchase recommendations in executive session thereby protecting owner information about their property and encouraging uninhibited discussion of property characteristics and benefits vital to an in-depth committee review.

An important part of the first meeting agenda was comments by each member of the Board of Commissioners giving their thoughts on the land purchase process and the committee's responsibility. Generally, their direction was to find the best park land available. They suggested the committee consider a variety of sizes in available land and to recognize that smaller parcels in the most densely populated parts of the county may be as valuable as larger parcels in the less populated areas. The land nominations should be made without contemplation for how it may be developed. The committee was encouraged to seek public input as part of the process.

## **Land Nomination and Rating Process**

Publication of the land nomination process began in December 2008. The decision was made to allow nominations to be taken through January 31, 2009. This was well publicized along with the nomination process including electronic transmission of nominations which is how the majority was received. The role of the Citizens Advisory Committee was also explained in the early publicity.

The nomination format included a request of the nominator's name and contact phone number, the property owner's name, address and phone number, the property location, address and size, and the tax parcel number if known. Importantly, the form also asked if the owner was a "willing seller" in compliance with commission direction.

Staff made a special effort to contact property owners of nominated parcels from the 2006 program to determine if they were interested in having their property considered in the new program.

Response to the publicity was immediate and in large numbers. In the 2006 program, 94 properties were nominated. In the 2008 program, over 340 properties were submitted for consideration. The task of managing the amount of information required on each parcel for informed decision making on the part of the committee became considerable. Staff working with the county's Information Services Department responded to the challenge by committing the research documentation on each site to electronic format.

For every parcel nominated the following information was provided to each member of the Citizens Committee:

- Copy of the nomination form with "willing seller" confirmation
- County map showing the property location
- Aerial showing the property boundary lines
- Aerial showing the topography
- Aerial showing water features (if any)
- Owner's write-up of property which features why it would make a good public park
- County tax information of the site

The Citizens Committee was presented the rating/ranking criteria developed in the 2006 program. After much debate, the same criteria were adopted with some modifications and a change in the level of importance in the ranking weighting. Below are the criteria and weighting as revised and listed in priority order:

- Underserved Areas: Property is located in an area in need of additional public parks. Weighting: 14.8%
- Parcel Size: Property is of appropriate size for potential future park land relative to available property in that area. Weighting: 12.31%
- Future Usability: Property lends itself to long-term, future public use. Weighting: 11.79%
- Environmental: Property has environmentally sensitive characteristics such as endangered plants, significant animal habitat, exceptional natural character such as specimen trees or plants, or may protect significant habitat or natural features. Weighting: 11.03%
- Accessibility: Property is easy to get to by public. Good public road, sidewalk, or trail access. Property may be served by public transit. Weighting: 10.51%
- Linkage to Parks, Trails, Historic Sites: Property is contiguous to existing park land. Property is adjacent to trails, sidewalks, and bike trails, etc. which would link it to other parks or historical sites. Weighting: 9.74%
- Topography: The physical lay of land – generally flat, level, steep grades, etc. – and the impact of the topography on potential future public uses. Weighting: 8.97%
- Hydrology: Property has water features which lend themselves to public recreation interests – lakes, ponds, springs, streams. Property may potentially provide protection for current or future public water resources. Weighting: 8.46%
- Historical: Property is confirmed to have historical significance. Property is on the national, state, or local historic register. The property has the potential to enhance an existing historical parcel. Weighting: 6.15%
- Threat Level Timing: Property is under threat of imminent development under normal economic conditions. Weighting: 6.15%

Total

100.0%

For this committee, staff generated all data electronically on memory sticks. This reduced the volume of paperwork and the expense to the county to generate the data.

After staff contact with nominated land owners to determine if they were willing sellers, the property list was reduced to 244 sites. The committee was given this list and asked to rate each property based on the approved criteria and weighting. Committee members reviewed all files on every property and assigned a score to each property in each of the ten criteria. The committee members submitted their data in the electronic spreadsheet, that was developed for the first bond issue and revised for this bond issue, to reflect the new weightings. Staff then combined all the spreadsheet results submitted, resulting in a 1 to 244 rank order listing of properties reflecting the input of each committee member.

After the initial ranking process was completed, the committee began discussion of the presentation format. This conversation was aimed at meeting one of the beginning charges of the Board to provide a good mix of property sizes in the committee recommendation. The result of this was development of three categories of ranking based on property size. These are as follows:

- 10 acres and under
- 10.1 to 50 acres
- 50 acres and over

Following this exercise, the committee was provided the 244 property rank order list and began discussion of reducing the list to a number which would represent the top ranked sites and be a workable number for site visits. As with the past program, the committee agreed unanimously that no parcel would be recommended without a site inspection. All Saturdays in August were selected as the land tour days. The group began work at 7:00AM on those days and concluded in the late afternoon.

The visit list was set at 60 sites because of time constraints. Selections of sites to be visited were made by discussion of the rank order within each size category. Also, each member was given an "add-back" opportunity to put back on the list properties they believed were worthy of personal inspection even if the particular property had not initially scored high in the quantitative measures. Approximately four properties were added back to the site visit list through this process.

After completion of the site visits, the committee met to review the properties and discuss each member's field observations. They ranked by size category listing and evaluated the property remaining on that list after personal inspection. From this process, the list was reduced to 27 properties to be recommended to the Board. These properties were then ranked within size category by committee vote for the final rank order listing.

The presentation model was further discussed by the group, and the decision was made to also provide the Board of Commissioners with a portfolio recommendation for property purchases. The committee acknowledged that effective combinations of parcels requires consideration of factors that do not come into play until properties are compared as a "portfolio", both together as 2009 recommendations, and in combination with the existing parks and green space already owned by the county. A goal of this effort is to balance the attributes of the properties purchased by not concentrating on the absolute number of properties bought, but developing a mixture of properties offering diverse recreational benefits to the county.

Objectives of the portfolio presentation are as follows:

- 1) Property distribution (location as relates to other nominated properties.) Based on the assumption that the tax assessment will approximate the FMV appraisal, is this a fair use of bond money when taken together with other proposed purchases?
- 2) Do the properties recommended in a given combination represent a good cross-section of types of property: e.g., rolling and open, substantial tree canopy, unique topography such as mountain tops, water bodies, etc.
- 3) Does the portfolio preserve green space in parts of the county that has relatively little green space taking into consideration land already owned by the cities, county, state, and federal governments?
- 4) Does the portfolio fill a recreational or environmental purpose that currently is not well-served in the county? Do the properties allow for future visioning of possible new recreational opportunities for a changing demographic?

- 5) Could portions of the portfolio provide for "destination" recreation (cultural tourism) and thereby enhance the prosperity of the county and its businesses?
- 6) Does the portfolio have components with aesthetic quality and appeal – the "wow" factor of natural beauty?
- 7) Environmental Assets – variety of environmental qualities which enhance the quality of the property for public use, such as water features, drinking water source protection, unusual terrain, native plants, wildlife habitat protection and tree canopy.
- 8) Quality of Life – degree to which the portfolio will positively impact the Quality of Life of the public.

The Committee believes that its service to the Board of Commissioners would not be complete without it making recommendations on the optimal combination of properties based on these high-level factors.

### **Public Input Process**

As mentioned previously, the formation of the Parks Bond Citizens Advisory Committee is due to the Board of Commissioners recognition of the value of public participation in the land purchase process. In keeping with this spirit, the Citizens Committee made every effort to afford the public the opportunity to be heard in the land nomination process. Due to the volume of nominations, the committee elected to have two evenings dedicated to public comment. Some 167 residents participated by providing information on nominated sites in the form of oral and visual presentations, petitions presented, and groups supporting the presenters.

In addition, the Committee allotted time for public comment in each of its meetings. Speakers were allowed to present their thoughts on any relevant topic including commenting on specific parcels or simply providing input on the process. These portions of the meetings were also attended by the news media.

A website location was established for public input.

## **Summary**

The recommendations on land purchase under the 2008 Parks Bond Program are submitted to the Board in priority by size of properties. Following that is the portfolio recommendation developed as previously discussed. This recommendation is a suggested approach to combining specific properties so that the County has a balanced land purchase that meets a variety of different recreational needs of its citizens. However the committee recognizes the Board is to make the final decision on what properties to pursue.

The response to the land nomination process was enormous when compared to the number of parcels submitted in the previous program. Many beautiful properties were nominated. Many were supported by members of the public with a passion for a certain site. The committee spent many hours in individual analysis and group consideration of all properties. We believe we have shaped a recommendation list which meets the goals set out by the Board in our initial meeting.

We all have understood the great responsibility given the committee in this process. We each invested our time knowing that what we are doing will contribute to the quality of life in Cobb County for many years to come. We appreciate the opportunity and wish the Board and staff the very best in implementing our recommendations.